

## **First summer academy on social vulnerability and disasters**

**Knowledge about the relationship between people, resources, and natural hazards will determine the future. This prompted the United Nations University and the Munich Re Foundation to hold a summer academy on social vulnerability. The academy provided an opportunity for experts from around the world to develop new approaches to complex issues such as human security and the resilience of complex social systems in the context of natural disasters.**

*From 23–29 July 2006, a panel of experts met to discuss these issues at Schloss Hohenkammer, close to Munich in Germany. The title of the summer school was “Global water hotspots: Social vulnerability and resilience building.”*

Just two weeks ago, a tsunami devastated the south coast of the Indonesian island of Java. More than 500 people lost their lives even though an early warning system had been installed. Societies are increasingly faced with more frequent and intense floods, famine, and hurricanes – among other disasters. The year 2005 was marked by the greatest disaster losses in living memory, with the strongest storms in history. Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma left a path of devastation along the Gulf Coast of the United States and the Caribbean. Whether in traditional rural communities or in megacities, the social vulnerability of people facing dwindling resources and escalating natural forces is on the rise. As people’s risk perceptions differ greatly from one region to another, there is a pressing need for intense research. Only when we know how to increase societal resilience and reinforce human security can we stem the tide of negative catastrophe impacts. Only then can human lives be saved and the quality of life improved.

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Against this important background, the United Nations University and the Munich Re Foundation took the initiative to further global research into social vulnerability. Ten professors and 25 outstanding young scholars from universities across the world took advantage of this opportunity and used this first summer academy to explore complex issues in an interdisciplinary forum. PhD candidates from Brazil, China, Ecuador, India, Mexico, the USA, and Germany exchanged experiences and developed their research networks.

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The focal point of the one-week summer school was water, and it dealt with water-related social vulnerabilities and resilience building. The participants discussed topics such as water availability and sanitation, flood and drought, poverty and the lack of risk awareness. Interdisciplinary analysis and the search for sustainable policy recommendations are particularly important. Professor Dr. Janos J. Bogardi, Director of the Institute for Environment and Human Security of the UN University in Bonn pointed out in his closing speech that we can only implement sustainable and effective catastrophe management if delicate and complex social structures are taken into consideration.

Professor Dr. Úrsula Oswald Spring from the National University of Mexico, the current holder of the Munich Re Foundation Chair on Social Vulnerability at the UN University, emphasised that in spite of significant cultural differences, the same basic underlying societal problems exist everywhere. “In fact, women, the elderly, and children are the hardest hit during and after catastrophes. In many countries, these victims survive only because the women have developed solidarity systems. This is the area where more investment is needed in order to reduce the vulnerability of families, villages, and even entire regions.”

The organisers see the summer academy on social vulnerability as a significant platform for the growing field of vulnerability research. To provide further impetus, the summer academy will be held again in future years. Thomas Loster, Chairman of the Munich Re Foundation stressed that “the academy should not only be an academic exercise. It should also

contribute to identifying solutions for people at risk. Politicians must recognise the paramount importance of these issues. They must include social vulnerability and human security in their decisions.”

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### **The Munich Re Foundation**

The Munich Re Foundation, set up by one of the world's leading reinsurers, Munich Re, began its work in April 2005. Its central objective is to serve people at risk according to the motto "From Knowledge to Action". The foundation addresses major challenges of our time: disaster prevention, environmental and climate change, water, population growth, urbanisation and poverty.

Homepage: [www.munichre-foundation.org](http://www.munichre-foundation.org)

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### **The United Nations University (UNU)**

The United Nations University (UNU) was founded in 1973 to provide a forum for science to address pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare. With headquarters in Tokyo, the UNU has a worldwide network of institutes and training centers, including the Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) in Bonn, established in 2004.

Homepage: [www.unu.edu](http://www.unu.edu) and [www.ehs.unu.edu](http://www.ehs.unu.edu)

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